

Teachers As Advisors Program in Pasco County, Florida

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Introduction

Pasco County is located on Florida's Gulf Coast, north of the Tampa Bay and St. Petersburg/Clearwater communities. The Pasco County School District, 14th largest in the state, has over 31,000 students enrolled in 40 schools.

Teacher advisor programs are featured in both middle and high schools in Pasco County Schools in Florida. The middle school advisement plan is called The Personal Enrichment Program (PEP) and is operating in six schools. Middle schools were the first to have teacher advisement programs and set an example for high school schools. It is the development of the high school Teacher Advisor Program which will be discussed here.

The high school program is referred to as Teacher Advisor Program (TAP) and is currently in four of the county's six high schools. While programs may vary from one school to another in order to accommodate schedules, different school populations, and teacher interests, advisement programs share a common foundation. Advisement programs are based upon the principles of developmental psychology/guidance. Program activities focus on major developmental tasks such as academic success, career exploration, decision-making, and interpersonal efficacy. The TAP plan was developed during the 1984-85 school year. It was first introduced into Pasco High School in grades 9-12 as a pilot program. Three additional schools have since implemented TAP: Ridgewood High School, Gulf High School, and Hudson High School. A fifth high school, Land O'Lakes High School, received a Florida Department of Education grant for implementation as well.

Getting Started

Several factors contributed to the school district's interest in TAP. Educators were concerned about the problems facing young people and these problems were directly related to progress in school. The Florida schools had a high dropout rate. In addition, educators were being asked to help prevent academic failure, teen pregnancy, drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. The state legislators had increased graduation requirements in Florida high schools and there was a greater need to support students as they faced these additional pressures.

As a result the first pilot program at Pasco High School focused on 'at risk' students. Special attention was given to minority students, alternative education students and exceptional education students who were in danger of dropping out of school. Students were asked to participate voluntarily and to meet with teachers who were designated as advisor. The program was expanded the following year to serve all students at the school.

The assumption behind high school TAP is the same as that for middle schools. A need exists for an organized advisement program where a caring adult is linked with a group of students as their advisor. The advisor is an information disseminator, a friendly listener, and a student advocate.

What Were The First Steps in Getting Started?

Step 1: District-level Student Services administrators noted the success of the advisement program (PEP) in the middle schools and believed that such a program would also be valuable in the high schools. A planning committee was organized to study the potential for

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high school advisory groups. The committee reviewed materials from other schools (e.g. Ferguson-Florissant Schools in Missouri; Cobb County Schools in Georgia; Wilde Lake High School in Maryland, etc.) Financial support for high school advisement came from the Florida Legislature and Department of Education in the form of the Omnibus Education Act which provided grant money to pilot TAP sites.

Parents received introductory letters about the Advisement Program.

Step 2: A steering committee within the high school was organized to consider the information and recommendations of the initial planning committee. This committee surveyed faculty members and also developed a visitation form which was used by various faculty members who visited other schools with advisement programs. This provided some uniformity in observations and data collection.

The committee also examined the student advisement services already available in the school through school counselors, career specialists and student services team members.

Step 3: The District administrators wrote a Department of Education grant proposal for the implementation of TAP, which was funded. These funds provided for a TAP Coordinator and a TAP secretary. The TAP Coordinator took responsibility for providing leadership to the program and developing a series of guidance units which could be used by the advisors.

Step 4: State funds were also used to provide staff development training to teachers at the high school. Inservice workshops were arranged on Saturdays for interested faculty and a week-long workshop was offered in the summer. Participants were paid a stipend for attending.

Step 5: The district guidance supervisor and the TAP Coordinator continued to provide timely inservice training and consultation throughout the school year. Voluntary training sessions, conducted by the TAP Coordinator during the year, focused on 'how to' strategies for facilitating group meetings with the advisees.

Step 6: Parents received introductory letters about TAP. Open house programs included demonstration of TAP activities.

Step 7: TAP was first implemented during the second semester of the school year after five months of planning and program development activities.

What Were Some of the Initial Problems?

Barriers facing the implementation of TAP were not unlike those which might accompany any significant change in a school setting. Teacher resistance was a critical issue. Approximately 25 percent of the teachers had serious concerns about TAP and there were others who were less than supportive. They were apprehensive about being placed in a group facilitator role and some were unsure that they were qualified to be advisors. "I can't do this... I wasn't trained to be a counselor," said one teacher. However, most of the teachers were assisted greatly through staff development training and the competence and role issues were less intense.

Teachers were also concerned about the amount of time that would be required for advisement and record keeping and they wondered about compensation for an extra preparation. The latter was eventually addressed and resolved throughout the district's bargaining unit and teacher contracts.

Another barrier for the first year of TAP was the reluctance of seniors in the school to support the program. Seniors were less responsive than students in grades 9-11 and their resistance tended to dampen enthusiasm for the program. Advisors had to work hard to involve them. With the exposure to TAP, succeeding senior classes have been more receptive and student resistance is no longer a problem.

A problem also existed about how to make TAP meeting times a priority during the school week. The initial infrequency of TAP meetings—about once every two weeks—caused the bonding between the advisor and advisee to bog down; there was not enough continuity. Again, staff development training helped correct the problem. More time was scheduled for advisement in subsequent years and on a more regular basis.

Parent resistance was nearly nonexistent. Any concerns expressed by parents seemed to be addressed when they received specific information about the purposes and goals of TAP through letters and at school meetings. A few phone calls came from people who were concerned about “delving into children’s personal and social lives.” Some school administrators thought that a fundamental faction in the community might raise objections to some of the proposed advisory activities, but this did not prove to be an issue.

From the beginning, guidance staff was involved in the organization of TAP. The program was initiated by the district’s guidance supervisor under the umbrella of developmental guidance.

The school guidance counselors have many roles in TAP, including; information resource, program trouble-shooter, counseling referral source and teacher consultant/trainer. Counselors are actively and visibly involved in TAP. They circulate among TAP groups during TAP meeting times. They coordinate guest speakers for TAP sessions and, on occasion, serve as guest speakers themselves. They conduct staff development activities for TAP and serve on TAP cluster support teams. At least one counselor is a member of each school’s TAP steering committee, helping the committee to plan activities which reflect the school’s current guidance themes.

Steering committees are composed of 5-10 members who meet on a regular basis, usually weekly. Membership includes teachers, counselors, administrators and at least one student representation. The committee provides program administration and leadership.

State funds are no longer available to hire a school-based coordinator and secretary for TAP as they were during the first year. Therefore, all TAP programs in the district are now coordinated by the steering committee and guidance staff in their respective schools. The program is coordinated at the district

level by the Supervisor of Student Services. The principal has the following roles in TAP:

- 1) Serves on the TAP steering committee and helps prioritize activities.
- 2) Arranges the TAP group meeting schedule
- 3) Circulates throughout the school during TAP time and on occasion as a guest speaker.
- 4) Monitors and assesses the program
- 5) Services on a grade-level support team.

How is the Program Scheduled?

Currently teacher advisor groups are scheduled to meet a minimum of once a week for 35 minutes. TAP is included in an activity bell schedule in which a few minutes are taken from each regularly scheduled class period during the day in order to create the meeting time within the school day.

TAP is generally scheduled in the morning usually after second period. Attempts have been made to vary the meeting times throughout the school day, but it was found that afternoon advisement times conflicted with student release for the vocational and work release programs.

Advisement sessions are scheduled every day for the first two weeks of school. Advisors focus on orientation, review of the school’s handbook, code of student conduct, school procedures, study skills and self-concept related to school. Additional sessions are scheduled when it is time to distribute report cards and to register students for the next school year. Individual advisement sessions for advisees are required at least one time per semester and usually once during each six-week period. On some occasions, advisors meet

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individually with advisees when 'back-up' advisors are available to meet with the other advisors in their groups.

Advisors are required to talk with their advisee's parents at least one time per semester. This parent contact is considered essential to both the value of TAP and good public relations.

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How are Students and Advisors Matched?

Assignments of advisees to advisors are made on a random basis and advisory groups are formed on the basis of grade level. All students are included in the random groupings, including those in Exceptional Student Education and alternative education programs. All TAP programs in the district have adopted the philosophy that it is most beneficial for advisees to stay with their advisor for their four years of high school. Accordingly, an advisee would move through grades 9-12 with the same advisor. Some exceptions to the guideline occur to facilitate programmatic logistics, as well as interpersonal conflicts between advisors and advisees. When such a change is indicated, a counselor meets with those involved to facilitate the process.

Teacher participation as advisors varies from school to school and this, in turn, affects advisor/advisee ratios. The percentage of teacher involvement and respective ratios are shown in the table below:

SCHOOL	PERCENT OF TEACHERS INVOLVED	RATIO OF STUDENTS PER GROUP
PASCO HIGH SCHOOL	78	30:1
RIDGEWOOD HIGH SCHOOL	98	25:1
GULF HIGH SCHOOL	100	20:1
HUDSON HIGH SCHOOL	80	25:1

TAP is considered a legitimate curriculum assignment under the PASCO USEP employees' contract. As much as possible, teachers are asked to volunteer to be advisors and to participate in the program.

Is There A Guidance Curriculum?

To help advisors implement a developmental guidance program, seven Teacher As Advisors Program Manuals/Modules were designed as part of the curriculum. These modules are:

- 1) Orientation to Teachers As Advisors
- 2) Enhancing Motivation
- 3) Facilitative Communication
- 4) Decision-making and Problem-Solving Skills
- 5) Interpreting and Understanding School Records and Assessment
- 6) Career Advisement
- 7) Academic Advisement

Each of the modules is contained in separate spiral binder books and were developed by the first year's TAP Coordinator. A few general ideas and concepts on the topic of the modules are presented in each book. Next, some structured learning activities are outlined in a uniform format: title, goal, objective, materials and procedures. Advisors use the modules and activities as resources for working with their advisees in any way they may choose. In general, advisors tend to follow the order of the seven modules listed above.

Copies of all seven TAP modules are available to advisors. A TAP recordkeeping file box and folder for each advisee is also given to each advisor. Other resources included are referral information lists, career pamphlets and numerous brochures and pamphlets related to pertinent issues such as study skills and time management.

As new information or relevant resources become available, such as magazine articles and books, they are shared with advisors.

What are the Advisors Responsibilities?

Each high school advisor is seen as a group facilitator of the weekly TAP sessions. Although some teachers are hesitant to lead group guidance sessions, their responsibility is usually critical to expanding a program and providing more developmental guidance services to all students.

Advisors must meet individually with advises, no less than one time per semester. Likewise, parental contacts are made at least once a semester.

Some routine guidance tasks are also the responsibility of advisors, such as the distribution of progress reports and report cards. In this case, the advisor's main contribution is in follow up sessions related to the reports.

How Did Teachers Respond to the Program?

Teachers responded differently. Anxiety was high in some instances, as teachers were unsure and the program was unfamiliar to them. Some misunderstood the rationale for TAP and could not explain it. Others simply preferred to invest more time in their academic subject and saw TAP as an intrusion on teaching academics. Even some of those who were considered effective classroom teachers were hesitant about leading group guidance sessions.

Still other teachers responded enthusiastically. They welcomed the opportunity to meet students on a more personal basis. Many of them were convinced that students would like school better because of TAP and that improved academic performance would be revealed to the effectiveness of TAP. A great deal of skepticism dissipated as teachers had an opportunity to discuss ideas and work together in the staff development workshops. The information and training in skills improved teacher attitudes toward TAP.

Beginning with Pasco High School, the district has been awarded five Department of Education grants. Success is building upon success and each new TAP program seems to be more comprehensive than those which preceded it. It is the goal of the district to have TAP in all six high schools. Some of the schools have a half-time or full-time TAP coordinator, who assists advisors to assemble materials or prepare for group advisory meetings. The coordinator is also available to follow up on requests for information or perhaps to coordinate some special assistance for individual students.

The TAP Materials were selected from many sources and were organized into the seven modules (handbooks). These have proven helpful to advisors, as they may select activities which appeal to them. As TAP expands and includes additional group guidance, there will be a need to examine the handbooks and consider what other themes and activities might be added.

Guest speakers from the community often speak during TAP period. This helps bridge the gap between school and community and draws on valuable resources.

Looking Back and the Future

Since TAP was initially funded by department of education grant funds, evaluation and status reports were routine. Structured interviews and self-audits showed that teachers were generally supportive of advisement and that they believed in the concepts and rationale of the program. They made suggestions for changes in scheduling and recordkeeping, and teachers appreciated the opportunity to assess the program and make recommendations.

Over the years some positive changes have taken place because of TAP. Improvement in school attendance by students was dramatic during the first quarter of TAP's implementation of Pasco High School. There has also been an increase in the number/

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percentage of students entering colleges/universities. These outcomes related to TAP have reinforced advisors and inspired others to want TAP in their schools.

What Key Factors Have Contributed to the Program's Success?

Above all else, principal support of TAP has been the key issue. Without administrative interest and support it would not have been possible to even initiate the first steps. Administrative vision, leadership, and commitment at the district level have been invaluable.

Careful planning makes a difference. Although Pasco County benefited from department of education grants, the foundation for a developmental guidance program through TAP was already being laid by the middle school advisement programs. Guidance and counseling via special student services was moving ahead with positive results and it was relatively easy to fit TAP into the scope of existing services. TAP made it possible to reach more students, to be more flexible, and to address more skills and objectives.

It was helpful to have school-based TAP advisors consult with, visit, and observe TAP programs in other school districts. This stimulated their thinking and provided a reality base for concepts and logistical procedures.

Providing high quality and frequent staff development opportunities was very critical to program efficacy. Both internal and external consultants play significant roles in preparing the faculties for TAP. These consultants also helped set the tone for implementation, acknowledging that everyone was involved in a "process of learning, experimenting and growing" rather than receiving a "canned" guidance program. It is important for teachers to listen, share ideas and to be open to change.

The TAP steering committees played a strategic role in the implementation of the program. Appointed by the building principal, the committee was representative of faculty interests and skills. It is helpful to have at least one skeptic on the committee to provide a different perspective and who will reveal what resistant teachers might be thinking.

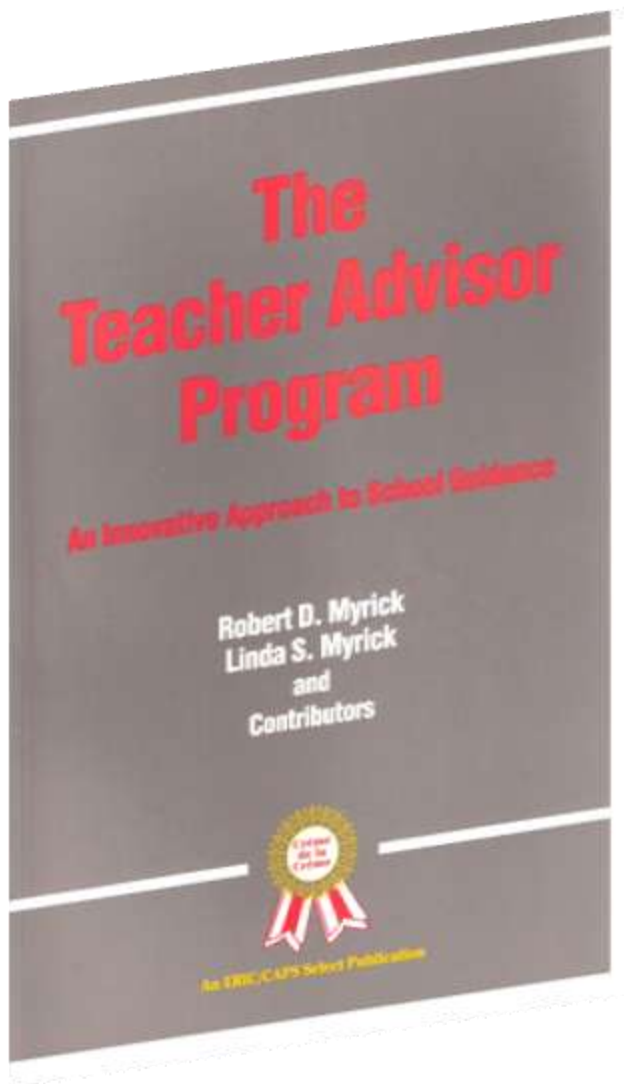
District plans are to implement TAP in all high schools and to complete a transition of leadership in each school from full-time or part-time TAP coordinators to a steering committee for teachers and counselors. More emphasis will be placed on advisory group sessions and scheduling of daily TAP meetings.

What Advice Do You Have for Those Who Are Starting Advisement Programs?

A steering committee is an important first step. The committee not only plans and designs, but it is the gauge of support and assessment and gives teachers ownership of advisement. Staff development and lead planning time are essential elements of success. Teacher resistance can be addressed when effective training programs are available. Public relations with parents and community can make changes easier and should not be overlooked. Between advisement at the middle school and TAP in the high schools, Pasco County is making a concentrated effort to reach out to students and give them more individual attention. This teacher advisement system is a movement toward facilitative learning environments which emphasize the value of teacher-student relationships.

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From the book, *The Teacher Advisor Program—An Innovative Approach to School Guidance* by **Robert D. Myrick** and **Linda S. Myrick** and contributors:

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